

# Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe

*A renewal of protests and democracy*

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Geoffrey Pleyers,  
Ionel N. Sava (eds.)



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## **Towards *vita democratica*: Urban Soundscapes and the Ruptures of Subjectivity**

**Srdan Atanasovski**

When speaking of democracy, the language of Jacques Rancière becomes strangely physical. “Real democracy“, states Rancière in his paper delivered in 1986, “would presuppose that the *demos* be constituted as a subject present to itself across the whole surface of the social body”.<sup>263</sup> In other words, Rancière links life in democracy to the existence of the political subject (in its strong sense) and to its “presence to itself”, to its possibility to appear as materially immanent to itself in the reality of the social space. In this paper I explore the urban sonic ecologies of Belgrade in order to answer a question if there is a potential in the everyday embodied existence for establishing *vita democratica*. Starting off with critical analysis of postmodern philosophy of immanence, I try to resituate subject as an actor in the everyday. Not only is this subject a “rare” rupture in the fabric of language-body (as in Alain Badiou’s writings), but it would also be “unstable”, intuitive (in Bergsonian sense) and carnal. I then analyse how hegemonic discourses of capitalism-nationalism establish themselves through the means of urban soundscape in Belgrade and discuss two events where I locate these ruptures of subjectivity on the plain of immanence which have the potential not only to destabilize the social machine of captivation, but also to transform the body of the individual into a thinking agent which acts as a political subject.

I take the clue from Rancière’s paper as an invitation to explore whether we can revitalize the concept of subject while conceptualizing the society on the plane of radical immanence, as advocated by the Deleuzian philosophical lineage. I would argue that radical immanence is not an empty philosophical concept, but a necessary ontological vantage point if we wish to theorize *vita democratica* in practice, if the *demos* is to inscribe itself on the surface of the social body. However, in postmodern philosophy of immanence the subject is usually left absent or incapacitated to act. The critique of modernist concept of subject as a discursive mirage was poignantly formulated through the concept of subjectification, used both by Michel Foucault and Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These authors questioned the modern, enlightened subject, understood as an independent agent whose political agency is based on his capacity to perform the act of free will. Not only does the concept of subjectification teach us that most of the choices which appear as free are predetermined by the discursive apparatuses, but also that individual as such, reduced to bare life, remains invisible to the society unless accepting this predetermined set of label. In other words, the realm of politics, as understood by

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<sup>263</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1995), 39.

Rancière, is impossible to form as in order to enter the political struggle individual is always already captured by the “police”, that is, by the systems of identification and categorization through which the society operates. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari speak about the realm of materiality which escapes the social apparatuses – the body without organs which is the generator of unmediated desire, the potential of deterritorialization, the source of cuts which disturb the flows of capital. However, the body without organs as such is inadmissible in the realm of political; it always remains outside the processes of negotiation. Thus, the ideal of freedom from the social apparatuses offered by Deleuze and Guattari is the model of schizophrenic – person who negates the captivity, whose actions are not predetermined, the body where the flows of desire remain unregulated.<sup>264</sup> Albeit, in all its freedom, the schizophrenic remains politically fundamentally incapacitated.

The rise of new philosophy of subject, truth and emancipation can be construed precisely as a reaction to this dead-end which postmodernism presented to the thinkers of the new left – how is one supposed to question the hegemonic discourses and politics of inequality if his own position as an independent political subject acting out of his own free will is brought in question? If all subjectivity arises only through process of subjectification, how can we defend the merits of our own choices? As thinkers such as Rancière refute the current systems of “representative democracy” – or “democratic materialism” as dubbed by Alain Badiou – describing them as forms of oligarchy, how are they supposed to defend their own position when demanding restructuring of existing systems of societal life? In certain extent, both Badiou and Rancière resort to the notions of transcendent or universal laws in order to resuscitate the post-postmodern subject, or to bring back the “sincerity” of the political subject. When Badiou affirms that “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths”,<sup>265</sup> the mode of existence of “truths” is deliberately pushed outside of the “normal” existence. Likewise, for Rancière, the truthfulness of fundamental equality which is the basis of the processes of emancipation stands out of the discussion as the given. My goal in this paper is to show that the existence of the sincere political subject can be based in the realm of pure radical immanence in order to perform a philosophical exercise, and out of belief that the potentiality of change is real only if it is omnipresent even in the everyday life, immanent “across the whole surface of the social body”. Overturning the model of schizophrenic, I propose the model of “resilient body”. In this model I start with the presupposition that the carnality of one’s body provides one with both existential continuity (where I draw on Guattari’s concept of individual as an “existential monad”, and contrary to Deleuzian haecceity, a mere thisness by which the individual is reduced to interpolation of various acts of social machines and flows of desire), and political agency, as being present and acting on the surface of the social body. In other words, the while the existential reducibility of carnal body provides it with a sense of oneself, its immanent presence on

<sup>264</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); idem., *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>265</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 4.



the surface of the social body endows it with the political agency. Rephrasing Badiou's maxim, I propose that "there are only somatic bodies and discursive social apparatuses, except that there are carnal bodies". By performing the distinction between "somatic body" and "carnal body" I wish to emphasize that there the capacity of the discourse to capture the body is always limited and never all-encapsulating. However, there is an existential continuum of the body as an organic entity, and in this rephrasing the "there are – except that" signal does not imply the transcendent existence – carnal body remaining a purely immanent entity – but the existence outside of discourse.

The field of my exploration is the urban soundscape of Belgrade. The urban sonic experience seemingly cuts across social and physical barriers, which makes it one of the most potent vehicles of imposing and replicating patterns of cultural hegemonies of capitalism-nationalism. However, at the same time, it forms the somatic plane of the social body where politics can occur and where subject can inscribe itself and contest the policing hegemonies. In order to explore the resistance to the capitalism-nationalism machine I start with two particular aspects of today's Belgrade soundscape: the sonic religiouscape and the sonic policescape. Contemporary Serbian society can be construed as a post-secular, where the narrative of a secular nation based on values of enlightenment has collapsed and the religion is drawn back into the political arena and openly and actively participates in producing and representing the nation. Moreover, the political and historical conjecture contributes to the emphasized role of the church: Serbian Orthodox Christianity has been acting as a defining criterion for being a member of Serbian nation since its inception, and its importance has been on the rise since the fall of state socialism and the outbreak of civil and religious war in the former Yugoslavia. Thus, it is possible to speak of "Serbian religious nationalism" as a dominant paradigm in the Serbian society which influence the daily life and embodied practices of individuals. The architectural space and the soundscape of Belgrade is likewise dominated by the religious nationalism – in the public spaces, such as the Vračar plateau markedly influenced by the newly build St Sava temple, the monuments and the imagery of the Orthodox is interconnected with the symbolic of national commemoration, and while the Orthodox churches face no restriction on the sound level they are allowed to exercise, the sounds of all the other religions are markedly absent. The importance of the sonic religiouscape as the mechanism of regulating one's behavior is even more pronounced due to Orthodox custom of performing the sign of cross as the church bells ring. Finally, Serbian Orthodox Church customarily uses the bells to intervene in the public space – e.g., supporting nationalistic rallies – thus transforming the sound of bells into a clear ideological statement. The sonic religiouscape of Belgrade has been particularly reinforced in the last years by the installment of a new monumental set of bells at the St Sava temple, which are now the single loudest everyday event in the Belgrade soundscape, audible in a vast swath of central Belgrade. By sonic policescape I understand not only the obvious sounds of policing (understood in Rancière's sense), such as the sounds of police sirens, sound events accompanying security traffic diverting, etc., but also privately produced sound events which are directed towards property protection (such as personal car alarms, etc.). Policescape is here understood as a class-structured social space regulated through the paradigm of "security", thus maintaining the relations of inequality and protecting the property, both private and public. As such, I argue that both religiouscape and policescape

function as regulators of the hegemonic paradigm of capitalism-nationalism, performing the acts of classification and identification.

In order to analyze how subject as a “resilient body” – the carnal body which is irreducible to semiotic models, the residue which is not (or not yet) subjugated to mechanisms of discursive social control – exercise its agency in the sphere of the sonic politics and opens avenues of dissent and opposition, I will trace the potentiality of the body to actively produce resistance towards the social machines of capitalism-nationalism – embodied through sonic religioscape and policescape – by being “present to itself” in the field of sound. I explore how individuals react to the sounds of religioscape and policescape and how their bodies constitute resistance in two particular events which have provoked ruptures of subjectivity: the Belgrade 2014 Gay Pride and the October 2014 military parade. The Gay Pride, the third in Belgrade’s history and the first which was held without rampant violence in the streets, was accompanied by the public discussion to what extent sexuality should be kept private, with religious and right-wing groups demanding that “gays should parade within their four walls”. On the surface, the event proved to be surprisingly unproblematic, as it did not provoke simultaneous violent counter-rallies as in previous years. However, the city was heavily policed, with majority of citizens occupying central public space were diverted away and kept on a respectable distance from the course of the pride march. Besides the obvious visual presence of the policing force, their omnipresence in the city was also sonically accentuated through the presence of police helicopters flying over the central Belgrade. The short march was organized through two Belgrade central streets, mostly surrounded by public buildings housing the state and the municipality government, and it was accompanied by the international mainstream pop music played by the organizers. The moment that drew my attention occurred as the protesters were passing by the Church of the Ascension (Vaznesenjska crkva) located in Admirala Geprata Street, when the church bells (operated through electronic system) started to chime continuously. This sound event was spontaneously interpreted by the protesters as directed towards them, and they used their voices to express their dissatisfaction and to enter into the open sonic battle for the public space. Although recognized as an important event and even reported by the media, this vocal protest was surprisingly silenced by the organizers themselves, who stopped the march and asked the crowd for a minute of silence. In other words, the organizers acted as part of the policing apparatus *par excellence* – they silenced the political protest in its inception and demanded that each actor in the event (or, widely spoken, in the society) plays out her or his predetermined role. The event thus turned into a complex sonic conflict between the crowd, the organisers, the state apparatus (which demonstrated its surveillance power with the helicopters flying over) and the Serbian Orthodox Church. From my point of view, this opens important questions in regard to the nature of subjectivity, potentiality for democracy and the role which resilient bodies play in this process:

– *What triggers the rupture of subjectivity?* – Interestingly, the vocal protests of the participants were not triggered until the appearance of the sonic *punctum* – in reference to Roland Barthes’s twin concepts of *studium* and *punctum* developed in connection to the effects of photography on the spectator. While *studium* encapsulates the effects which can be construed through semiotic methods, the cultural, linguistic, and

political message of the photography, *punctum* stands for the direct relationship which occurs between the object and the beholder which cannot be grasped linguistically. Furthermore, Barthes portrays this encounter as deeply visceral, describing *punctum* almost as a physical wounding of the spectator.<sup>266</sup> In other words, my argument would be that the rupture of subjectivity appears only when the carnal body of the subject is “pushed”, physically “wounded” by the materiality of the discursive apparatus itself. One can even argue that the discursive apparatus is not as endangered when silent, as when it tests its ability to inscribe its code in the social reality, by producing excessive intensities.

– *Can we subvert the sonic hegemony?* – The participants of this “vocal protest” have reported their visceral enjoyment in the resulting sonic and performative event. In other words, through their action of vocalising their protest, they have managed to de-signify the sound of the bells, to reduce them to the innocuous object of enjoyment. Again, this draws us back to the question of excessive intensities produced by the apparatuses, as I would argue that this excessive intensity is precisely what destabilizes the process of encoding the social meaning and opens the window through which the resilient body can subvert, deconstruct or destroy the coded message.

Just nineteenth days later, the government in Belgrade organized a vast military parade, the biggest of its kind since the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, to honour First and Second World War anniversaries. Parade should have been scheduled for 20<sup>th</sup> of October, the day of liberation of Belgrade in the Second World War, but it was moved in order to coincide with the state visit of Russian president Vladimir Putin whose presence at the parade was highly appreciated by the authorities. However, due to contested legacy of the antifascism struggle of the Second World War and current political elites’ reluctance to embrace this legacy, the parade was also said to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, the historical event which is today unambiguously appropriated by the Serbian nationalistic discourse. However, it is not the parade itself that I wish to discuss, but the week long preparations and rehearsals of the military aviation for the parade which disrupted the everyday soundscape of Belgrade. These rehearsals, pre-announced in the television news programmes and on internet news portals, again opened the question who has the right over the public (sonic) space. I analyze citizens’ responses to these rehearsals both through content available on the internet (user-created content on particular news announcements and on twitter) and through semi-structured interviews. Citizens used the internet space to protest against the week-long rehearsals of the military aircrafts’ performance and to give voice to their struggle to cope with these rehearsals. Categorizing the discourse used by the internet users and by interlocutors, I have divided them into three categories: the first one, which exhibit clear (representative-)political position, formulated in opposition to the current regime, the second one, connected to the trauma of NATO bombing of 1999, and the third one, which problematizes the moment of the noise itself, without either representative-political position, nor articulated importance of sonic memory. In the first case, the sound of the parade rehearsals provokes response not only out of its sheer intensity, but as a material signifier of a

<sup>266</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by R. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

unwanted regime, and the negative attitude towards the sound is not generated because it disrupts one's everyday life in its materiality but because the individuals have had premeditated opinions towards the parade itself, as a project of the ruling party. I construe these individuals as actors in the semiotic production of space, which are already interpellated by ideological apparatuses. Thus, their agency is already pre-determined, not acting out of the resilience of the body but as a part of the ideological semiotic production. In the second case, individuals linked the experience of the parade rehearsals with the experience of NATO bombing 1999. Sonic experience of this historical event is very important for understanding its mnemonic legacy. Namely, while the NATO bombing wrought havoc on Kosovo, in the capital of Belgrade the major source of traumatization was, in fact, the sonic experience of the campaign. In the transfigured soundscape of the city relentless sirens announced imminent danger followed by the sound of heavy bombardment of military facilities and headquarters, political and governmental buildings in the city center and on its outskirts. Thus, while the "message" of the two sound events (1999 NATO bombing and 2014 Military Parade) is dramatically different (threat to nation-state sovereignty and citizens' security on one hand, vs. demonstration of nation-state military capacity, purportedly aimed at defending its sovereignty and citizens' security), the likeness and the memory of the materiality of the sonic experience links these two events in a way that overrides the differences in discursively produced meaning. Finally, in the third case, the individuals protested against the sound of the parade rehearsals as such, commenting on the ways it invades their private space, or disturbs their bodies. I construe these latter categories of reactions as an indicator that a resilient body can produce resistance towards the materiality of the hegemonic social apparatus. I particularly try to answer three questions:

– *What is the potential of carnal body as the place of memory?* – In the second category of reactions it was the body itself as served as the locus of the mnemonic processes, and these mnemonic processes proved germinal in subverting and distorting the "message", or the purport of the 2014 Military Parade. When analysing the production of social meaning, we usually assume the locus of intertextuality, the space where social texts are linked and intertwined, as a given, the one which almost needs no material bearing. However, if we place the body (and more specifically, the human body) as the locus of memory, then we also need to rethink the potential of social resistance, as the one which can rise out of the embodied mnemonic processes and not only through discursive practice.

– *Can a resilient body embody the thought and initiate a discourse production?* – The second and particularly the third category of reactions did not rely on firmly pre-established discursive formations, and there we can observe how discourse of resistance can arise through the agency of the resilient body, the body which is affected by and resists/obstructs the materialization or enactment of the hegemonic social apparatus.

– *What is the emancipatory potential of the embodied resilience?*

By discussing these questions I will investigate how these ruptures challenge the system of cultural hegemony and I will analyse how they open ground for the modern political subjectivity to arise. Concerning the last example, I will particularly delve on the issue of the public-private divide as the space where these ruptures arise. Rancière insists that negotiating between individual and community, public and private, is one of the

crucial conundrums of *vita democratica*. The public-private divide is also one of the most fundamental borders which structure everyday urbanity. One can argue that the ultimate position of power in society is the one which allows the oligarch to draw a line between what is public, and thus purportedly open to democratic procedures, and what is private and remains in the purview of the individual itself. Due to the nature of the sonic experience itself, studying soundscape provides ample opportunity to delve precisely into this opposition between public and private, both in matters how the borderline between private and public is being discursively produced and replicated, and how it is sonically negotiated, challenged and violated. Both through examining the case studies and through participant observation and focus groups I will investigate how the policing apparatus, on one hand, and individuals as political subjects on the other try to articulate, implement and impose their views on this matter.